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AUTHOR Schlenker, Barry R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a conceptual definition and model of self-presentational behavior. Self-presentation is defined as the attempt to control self-relevant images before real or imagined others. Several aspects of the definition are discussed along with the notion that people's self-presentations represent the choice of the most desirable images from sets of mutually exclusive alternative images. Factors that influence the desirability of an image are categorized into four components which provide the specification of the model, including: (1) the attractiveness of an image (A); (2) the perceived probability that the image describes the image object (P); (3) the perceived probability that the image is inaccurate (I-P); and (4) the expected value of erroneously attaching an image to an image object (E). These components are explained in great detail and used to create a formulation, D (desirability)=P(A) + (I-P)E, which allows the model to be applied to self-presentations, self-beliefs, and beliefs in general. Several implications of the formulation for self- and interpersonal beliefs as well as for self-presentations are also explored. (NRB)

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SELF-PRESENTATION: A CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MODEL

Barry R. Schlenker
University of Florida

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Self-Presentation: A Conceptualization and Model

Barry R. Schlenker

University of Florida

As I've discovered--and this has been made especially salient through interviews by newspaper reporters, who are marvelously adept at taking words that are innocuous enough at face value and turning them into morally loaded pronouncements with eschatological overtones--the idea of self-presentation evokes all manner of images, some of them conflicting and many of them negative. This is not a particularly novel or surprising observation, but if laymen were the only ones who sometimes seemed confused about what self-presentation is, there would not be as much cause for concern. Despite the importance of the area and its growing research popularity, relatively little attention has been paid to defining and analysing the concept of self-presentation. During the next few minutes, I will attempt to provide a conceptual definition and model of self-presentational behavior.

Definition and Conceptualization

Through aspects of their appearance and behavior people intentionally or unintentionally lay claim to particular self-images that comprise their identities. These images are mental pictures, fact distillations, categorizations, or schema of individuals, and have implications for how those individuals should behave, and how they are defined, evaluated, and treated by others (Schlenker, 1980).

Whenever people are in the presence of others, it is usually in their best interests to convey particular types of impressions (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, in press; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). Some projected images will be appropriate to the situation, make a desired impression on others, and result in desired reactions from others; other images will be inappropriate, make undesired impressions, and generate undesired reactions. Maximizing one's reward/cost ratio in social life involves, in large part, control of the self-images that are projected to others.

Definitions of self-presentation have typically taken one of two forms. The first form specifies self-presentation as any act that projects or is interpreted by others as projecting a particular impression of the actor. Goffman (1959), for example, does not explicitly define self-presentation, but he does explicitly include under its purview unintentional actions that cause others to act "as if" the actor conveyed some impression. Definitions of this sort appear to be more suitable when the interaction unit itself is the focus of concern, and are thus especially appropriate for sociological analyses that comment on the nature of social interaction. They seem unsuitable, though, for psychological analyses that focus on the individual in interaction, since they minimize the import of people's goals, plans, cognitions, and personalities.

The second form usually defines self-presentation as acts that attempt to influence others about the actor's characteristics <u>in order</u> to accomplish some explicit motivational objective, such as to increase power, gain approval/avoid disapproval, or establish a

"positive" self-image. Although these usually have the appropriate social psychological orientation, depending on the specific definition, they (a) are rarely explicit about the use of terms, (b) often unnecessarily limit self-presentation to acts that can come to the attention of an immediate audience, thereby inadequately taking people's reflective capabilities into account, or (c) mix the definition of the phenomenon itself with a specific theoretical account of the actor's motivation. Although definitions take on meaning in part from the theoretical context, it is usually a mistake to mix the two. It turns the definition into a theoretical proposition rather than a delineation of the phenomenon that theories should attempt to explain.

I will define self-presentation as the attempt to control self-relevant images before real or imagined others (Schlenker, 1980). There are several aspects of the definition worthy of discussion, and these will take us in certain conceptual directions.

Self-presentation is an intentional (i.e., goal directed) act whose immediate goal is to create a particular image of self in the eyes of real or imagined others, including those who are implied by the context of the behavior, e.g., preening before a mirror prior to a date. As such, it is a form of social influence. Through it, people can attempt to control how others will perceive, evaluate, and treat them, and can ultimately influence their own self-beliefs.

The types of impressions that people prefer to create must be defined in terms of their idiosyncratic preferences in the particular situation. Usually, people prefer to present themselves in "socially desirable" or "positive" ways, such as by appearing reasonably competent,

attractive, honest, etc. However, there are a variety of self-presentations and accompanying audience reactions that can best serve people's interests in specific situations (Jones & Pittman, in press; Schlenker, 1980). For instance, there are occasions when people's best interests are served by presenting themselves as assertive and perhaps even hostile, as when they must stand up for their own position during a conflict; a desired reaction from others would involve recognizing their autonomy and strength. In other situations, people might prefer to present themselves as incompetent and powerless in order to receive the protection and nurturance of others. Thus, the types of impressions people prefer to create depend on what they are trying to achieve; the specific motive for the act (e.g., power, supplication, approval-seeking, achievement) may vary. We will shortly consider a model that designates the factors people should take into account when deciding how to present themselves.

Once people decide to project a particular impression, the relevant image usually contains behavioral prototype, or response specifying, information. For example, an "intellectual" schema usually evokes certain behaviors and characteristics that should be possessed, and these act as action guides that direct behavior. Going beyond the mechanics of how to create a particular impression, however, is the fact that the perceived, imagined, or anticipated reactions of others to the actor provide feedback about whether the actor has created the desired impression, whatever it may be. If others respond in a manner commensurate with the intended impression, the actor has been successful in accomplishing his or her self-presentational goal; if they do not,

he or she has been unsuccessful. Thus, the impression-relevant reactions of real or imagined others serve as the pertinent feedback for assessing the effectiveness of one's self-presentational behavior.

The importance of the reactions of real or imagined others distinguishes self-presentational behavior from other behavior. Although nearly all behavior can reveal information about the actor, not all behavior can be classified as self-presentation (Jones & Pittman, in press; Schlenker, 1980). To qualify, the actor must intend to control how others perceive the self, which means that from the actor's perspective, the intended impression-relevant reaction of others is the criterion for assessing the effectiveness of the behavior.

At one extreme, some behaviors seem to be exclusively self-presentational in nature; people's only goal in the situation is to create a particular impression on others. An example is the sycophantic employee whose remarks reflect only what she thinks the boss wants to hear and not the employee's private views of the caliber of the recommendation. At the other extreme, some behaviors do not seem to contain any self-presentational component, as when people are unconcerned about projecting a particular image of self and the reaction of others is irrelevant to their goals. An example is a person who is totally engrossed in some intellectual task and oblivious to the presence or absence of others. In between these extremes are cases where people have several goals, and hence several criteria for determining how well the goals are being accomplished, and one of the goals is to make a particular impression on others. An example is a professional actor whose stage performance is designed to (a) meet

private standards of mastery, e.g., perform the role the way Laurence Olivier does, and (b) impress the audience, co-performers, friends, etc. Self-presentation is thus not an all-or-none phenomenon. When several goals exist in the situation, the more important the self-presentational goal is to the actor, the more concerned he or she should be with the impression-relevant reactions of others.

It is worth noting that self-presentation can be conscious or unconscious, and may or may not involve deception or the inaccurate portrayal of self (Schlenker, 1980). Of course, people sometimes try to project images of themselves that are self-aggrandizingly inaccurate. But in many cases, self-presentation involves bringing actual attributes or accomplishments to the attention of others, including by performing meritorious deeds in their presence. Veridical information that is in the actor's best interests is thereby selectively presented. In addition, self-presentation can reflect ingrained, habitual responses triggered by relevant social cues and does not always represent a conscious maneuver. Thus, all actions that are aimed wholly or in part at influencing real or imagined others to adopt a particular view of oneself are self-presentational. Further, self-presentation is the only means of exercising intentional control over the impression-relevant reactions of others to oneself. Note that this conceptualization includes more than just strategic, conscious self-maneuvering, which is how self-presentation is sometimes viewed.

A Decision Model

Often, perhaps usually, self-presentational goals and established plans to achieve them are unconsciously triggered by particular social

cues, thereby evoking habitual patterns of behavior that project specific images. Earlier in the developmental sequence, comparable situations may have prompted actors to expend considerable conscious effort to arrive at a decision about how to procede. Currently, these habit patterns permit economy of cognitive effort and allow conscious attention to be directed toward other problems. Even with such a vast repertoire of habits, however, there are still many occasions when decisions are required about how to present oneself, and it is also necessary to explain how the original decisions were once made. In essence, how do people decide between presenting one versus another self-image?

I propose (also see Schlenker, 1980) that people's self-presentations, and further their self-beliefs and beliefs in general, represent the choice of the most desirable possible images from amongst sets of mutually exclusive alternative images. Desirability is defined in accord with an extension of a basic subjective expected utility model of decision making. In brief, the desirability of an image represents the expected worth of attaching a particular image to a particular image object. From the perspective of the actor, it is the expected worth of presenting (for public self-presentations) or holding (for private self-beliefs) a particular self-image. The desirability of an image is not a constant, but fluctuates from situation to situation and from audience to audience within a range of possible values.

In considering the factors that influence the desirability of an image, we can concentrate on four major components. These components provide the specification of the model and also serve as heuristics

to illuminate the types of factors people's self-presentations and beliefs take into account.

First is the attractiveness of the particular image, which is the expected worth of the image if it actually was or was accepted by others as being descriptively accurate. For actors, this translates into the expected worth of being viewed as what the image is supposed to describe. It is what it would mean to the actor to be or to be seen as (say) intelligent, beautiful, popular, etc. Mathematically, it can be expressed in the standard SEU notation:

$$A = \Sigma\ p_i e_i$$

where A is the attractiveness of the image, p_i is the perceived probability that each of i consequences would occur if the image was accepted as accurate, and e_i is the perceived value of each of these consequences. Time does not permit a thorough examination of all of the details, but suffice it to say that when people privately contemplate images, the most attractive ones in sets of mutually exclusive images are their ideal images. They are the images they most admire and the ways they would most prefer to be or be seen.

Of course, people cannot simply view and describe themselves in these ideal ways, since reality (social and nonsocial) steps in to acquaint us with the rude facts of life. Reality acts as a constraint on self-presentations and self-perceptions. Thus, the second component in the model represents the perceived state-of-the-world. It is the perceived probability, which we will call P, that the image describes the image object. From the actor's perspective, it is the perceived probability that the image really does describe the actor (for self-

beliefs) or that the particular audience can be convinced it describes the actor (for public self-presentations). Naturally, some images have a high probability of describing the actor, while others will be viewed as ludicrously inappropriate descriptors. The third component is simply the reverse of the second, being the perceived probability that the image is inaccurate or will be seen as inaccurate (1 - P). In brief, these two components introduce the perceived "truth" or "facts" of the situation--can the image describe the actor? It is worth noting that actors will answer this question differently depending on the specific audience. Actors may believe they can successfully claim some images in front of gullible audiences that they could not hope to claim when dealing with discerning ones or when they privately ruminate about themselves.

The fourth component represents the expected value of erroneously attaching a particular image to the image object. From the actor's perspective, it is the expected value of holding erroneous self-beliefs (e.g., the consequences of mistakenly tackling inappropriately hard tasks on which one is doomed to failure) or publicly presenting the image but having others reject it (e.g., being laughed at, disapproved). In essence, this component represents the (largely) negative repercussions that befall people who believe they are or claim to be something they are not. It can be expressed as:

$$E = \Sigma\, b_i v_i$$

where E is the expected value of erroneously attaching the image, b_i is the perceived probability that each of i consequences would occur following erroneous attachment, and v_i is the perceived value of each

of these consequences.

Putting the four components together, we have the following expression:

$$D = P\,(A) + (1-P)\,E$$

where D is the desirability of the image and the rest of the terms have been previously defined. To repeat, actors will publicly present themselves as having or privately believe themselves to have the most desirable images from each set of mutually exclusive alternative images.

Although time does not permit a thorough examination of all of the implications, a few comments are especially important. First, the formulation is meant to apply to both self-beliefs and self-presentations. Of course, people may assess each of the components differently when they are alone as compared to in a specific public situation, but the model itself is the same in both cases. Further, the model can be applied to people's beliefs in general, not just their self-beliefs. For example, as we'll see momentarily, an observer's beliefs about an actor can also be described by the model.

Second, people's private beliefs and public self-presentations will differ only to the extent that being along versus being with a specific audience affects the actor's assessments of each of the components. For example, an actor may think that a particular significant audience would respond very favorably to a particular image, even though the actor does not privately find that image to be especially attractive. He then should be more likely to present that image to that audience then he would be to claim it privately as one of

his self-beliefs or to present it to other audiences who do not find it especially attractive. Similarly, an actor may privately believe that a particular image has a reasonably high probability of accurately describing her, but think there is only a small chance of successfully claiming that image in front of an especially critical, harsh audience. She then should be unlikely to present that image to the critical audience, even though she might privately believe she has the image-relevant attribute and present it to other, less critical audiences. Personality variables should play an important role in such deliberations and partially account for the presence or absence of cross-situational consistency in behavior.

Third, the model explicitly takes into account the oft-noted compromise between wishes and reality in people's self-beliefs and presentations to others. The most attractive images designate our wishes, while the remaining components designate the sometimes sobering constraints of reality. Using actor-observer differences to illustrate, an actor's self-descriptions should be more highly affected by image attractiveness than an observer's descriptions of the actor, since it may matter a great deal to the actor whether he is viewed as (say) competent rather tnan incompetent. From the actor's perspective, the high attractiveness of some images may more than compensate for a lower than optimal P. An uninvolved observer of the situation, though, would base his beliefs about the actor largely on his own perceptions of P (in this context, the perceived probability to the observer that the image accurately describes the actor). From the observer's perspective, all of the images in the relevant set would be roughly

equal in attractiveness (in this context, the expected worth to the observer of attaching the image to the actor) and error repercussions (in this context, the expected worth to the observer of an erroneous ascription of the image to the actor). A little thought about the components will reveal conditions under which self-serving biases in self-descriptions and self-presentations appear, disappear, and reverse, although time does not permit me to go into them.

In sum, the model has numerous implications for self and interpersonal beliefs as well as with self-presentational behavior. Although it is too early to tell how far this model will take us, I entertain the wish that it will take us a step forward toward the development of an empirically supported theory of self-presentation.

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